

BOYS' LIFE

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The Liechtenstein Imagination

**ALMOST EVERY YEAR WE GOT
A LIECHTENSTEINER WITH
A SURPRISE UP HIS SLEEVE.
TAKE JULIUS: HE BROUGHT
HIS OWN GOLF CLUBS,
BUT HAD ONLY GOLFED
WITH AN IMAGINARY BALL.**

BY JACK RITCHIE
Illustrated by Don Weller

Julius Moldenhauer was the only Liechtensteiner who ever showed up here equipped with a bag of golf clubs.

"I will join the school golf team," he announced. "Stevenson High does have one, does it not?"

I thought about that. Did we or didn't we? I didn't know.

Every year, Liechtenstein, which is a real country in Europe, sends over one of its students to spend a year at Stevenson High, and we get even by sending them one of ours. This year, we got Julius Moldenhauer, who is staying at our house. He arrived at the beginning of summer vacation.

Liechtenstein is 62 square miles of mostly mountains, and it doesn't have any income tax for native-born Liechtensteiners. To keep things running, they get their money from tourism, the sale of postage stamps, and I guess the other 90 percent comes from international trade firms that maintain corporate headquarters there.

Now, just because I don't know if Stevenson High has a golf team doesn't mean that I don't play some golf. I go out with Dad a dozen times a year, and one day I know I'll break a 100.

"What do you shoot?" I asked Julius, wondering just how good he really was.

His eyes got kind of dreamy. "Well, I think that at my present state of development, I would probably shoot in the low 80's."

I picked out the uncertain word. "Probably?"

He nodded. "It is speculation. Actually, I have never been on a golf course."

"You mean in America?"

"I mean anywhere." Julius went on to explain: "We do not have a golf course in Liechtenstein. At least not on my side of the mountains."

"Julius," I said, trying to sort this out, "if you've never been on a golf course before, what makes you think you'd shoot in the low 80's?"

He smiled. "One does not necessarily learn how to play golf on a golf course."

"One doesn't?"

"No. The overwhelming bulk of one's skill is actually acquired by consistent and arduous work on the driving ranges, the practice greens and so forth."

"And Liechtenstein has a driving range?"

"Well, no. However, I practiced long and assiduously in my father's pasture. He is a dairy farmer."

I could picture it. "It must have been pretty hard on the cows."

"In reality, they were never in any

danger of being struck by a golf ball." He tapped his forehead significantly. "I practiced with an imaginary ball."

I closed my eyes.

"It is the stroke, the swing, the *groove* which is the golfer's principal concern. Once that is mastered, it becomes merely a technicality to apply that stroke later on to an actual golf ball."

When I opened my eyes, he was still there.

"In truth," he said, "I did have *one* golf ball. But I did not want to ruin it. I saved it for my putting practice."

"In the pasture?"

He shook his head no. "A pasture is not an ideal place to practice putting. Among other things, the grass is too high. Therefore, I practiced in my Uncle Helmut's Alpine Inn. It is a large establishment, and the nap of the lobby rug made an admirable putting surface."

"Julius," I said, really wanting to know, "what in the world made you decide that golf is your game?"

"An English tourist stayed for one night at my uncle's inn. Upon departing, he—accidentally, I presume—left behind the golf clubs. Since he had provided no forwarding address, and did not return for his clubs, my uncle waited 90 days and then gave them to me."

Julius smiled happily. "Golf is the most democratic of all games. It consists of three distinct parts: the first being the drive and long irons; the second, the short irons, and the third, the putt."

"Where perhaps the taller, heavier man may excel at the drive and the long irons, this does not necessarily hold true for the short irons and the putt. The short irons demand an accuracy that is usually the *forté* of the medium-sized person. As for putting, it is the despair of the mighty and the joy of the frail; for in scoring, one 6-inch putt is exactly the equivalent of a 300-yard drive. So you see, it all comes together and averages out—what I call true democracy."



**JULIUS PLAYED LOUSY
AND HAD NO BUSINESS
TELLING ME HOW TO GOLF.
BUT I HUMORED HIM —
AND BROKE A HUNDRED
FOR THE FIRST TIME
IN MY LIFE.**

The next Saturday I borrowed Dad's car, and we drove to a public golf course, where Julius bought himself some golf balls.

I didn't know what to expect. I didn't think he was going to burn up the course, but on the other hand, almost every year we get a Liechtensteiner with a surprise up his sleeve.

He teed off first, and his drive carried about 220 yards straight down the middle of the fairway.

He frowned. "Strange. According to my expectations, that ball should have gone 10 yards farther."

I sliced my drive into the rough.

It was a par-4 hole. Julius put his second shot on the green, 12 feet from the cup. When it came his time to putt, he read the green, then stroked the ball in for a birdie. I finished with an eight.

Julius tried to be modest. "It was just luck on my part."

The funny part about it was that it *was* luck.

Because on the second tee, he hooked his ball into the woods. He hacked out in three strokes and felt he had to apologize. "Unfortunately, I never envisioned being imprisoned in a forest with a reluctant golf ball."

On his next shot, he found a sand trap. He finally managed to blast out. "I think it would have helped if I had seen sand in quantity before, but Liechtenstein does not have any significant amount."

When he finally reached the green, he got down on his hands and his knees and gave the green a good reading. He had to do that three more times, because he ended up having to putt four times.

He sighed. "Perhaps it would have been better if my uncle's rug had had a few idiosyncracies in it, but it was relentlessly level."

I finished the front nine in 54, which is about what I usually do. Julius had a 79, and he wasn't improving with time.

On the 10th tee, Julius suddenly snapped his fingers. "I have it!"

Naturally I asked him what he had.

"The solution to my incompetency," he said. "I had one golf ball, but it was an *English* golf ball. And are not English golf balls a bit *smaller* in diameter than



your American golf balls?"

I guessed so.

"That was why my first drive did not travel as far as I expected," Julius said. "The larger ball presents greater wind resistance. From now on, I will adjust my mind from the smaller English ball to the larger American one."

It didn't make any difference. His best hole was the par-3 17th. He got an eight.

I was about to tee off on the 18th, when Julius stopped me. "I have noticed you stand too far from the ball. This forces you to lunge at it, and this in turn creates a certain anarchy in your drives."

I should have told him that he was the last person in the world to give me advice about playing golf, but he'd had a rough morning, so I humored him and stepped a little closer to the ball. I hit a fairly good drive down the middle, which I don't do all that often.

I was on the fairway with my No. 8 iron when Julius said, "I have observed that you constantly cut into your ball in your short game. I think your problem is

basically psychological. Subconsciously, you *fear* to create a divot. You regard this as a form of vandalism to a perfectly innocent piece of turf. However, it is necessary to get *under* the ball. Therefore, cast aside your reservations and your conscience. Get *under* the ball."

So I cast aside my reservations and conscience and got under the ball. My shot hit the green and stayed.

When I got ready to putt, Julius spoke up again. "When you putt, you have a tendency to *strike* the ball. One must stroke. Stroke!"

Well, I stroked and sank a 14-foot putt for the first birdie I'd ever made.

I finished with a 108. What Julius had should remain forever a secret.

The next morning he got into the car without his golf clubs. "One must face reality. I know that I will not improve. Or at least not very much."

He looked at me speculatively. "As the great Anglo-Irish playwright, George Bernard Shaw, once remarked, 'He who can, does. He who cannot, teaches.' I sense that, despite your present sloppy game, you have a potential for good golf. But you must listen to me and obey and practice. I believe I can guarantee remarkable improvement."

So we drove out to the golf course where I listened and obeyed and broke one hundred for the first time in my life.

Within a week, I was shooting in the low 90's. As I began dipping into the 80's, I decided to find out if Stevenson High really did have a golf team.

Finally I located someone who'd heard a rumor that we did and that the coach might be Mr. Davidson, who also teaches biology during the school year.

Julius came with me when I went to Coach Davidson's house. I learned that our season starts in the middle of summer vacation and goes on into October, and that he'd accept almost anybody who was alive.

When I mentioned how Julius had improved my game, Coach Davidson got real interested. "I think I need an assistant, but I can't get anybody to volunteer. How about you, Julius?"

Julius jumped at the chance. He made every practice session and got everybody to listen and obey, and it chopped strokes off everybody's game.

I think it was mostly because of him that our team took second place in the Fox River Valley Conference. It was the same team—except for me—that had come in last year before.

I even entered the State Junior Match Tournament, with Julius as my caddy, and got as far as the quarterfinals. I can hardly wait until next year.

I can also hardly wait for spring and baseball season.

This winter Julius spent a lot of time in our basement swinging the bat—at an imaginary baseball, of course.

He claims he's hitting .425. ♣